A Pilot Study Exploring the Potential of Improv in Strengthening Youth–Adult Partnerships

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Abstract

This study qualitatively explored the potential of improv for strengthening youth–adult partnerships. Seven members of a youth-adult research collaborative participated in a 2-hour professionally facilitated improv workshop. Participants provided insights about their experiences through a follow-up qualitative interview questionnaire. Participants indicated that improv assisted in dismantling power differentials that often exist in youth–adult partnership contexts, also noting that improv helped them to express their true selves more readily, along with helping them to see new and more "human" sides to their team members. Participants were enthusiastic about accessing further improv opportunities, noting that improv should be embedded into other youth–adult partnership efforts, as such approaches were deemed particularly helpful in building relationships and trust. The further inclusion of improv activities in youth-serving intervention and prevention efforts would benefit from additional exploration as ways by which youth–adult collaborations might be innovated and strengthened.

Key words: youth–adult partnerships, youth voice, improv

Background

Scenic improvisation ("Improv") is the spontaneous production of unscripted responses to a scenario of the moment, involving impromptu acting, scene development, and problem solving; perhaps surprisingly, this technique has deep roots in social work and many improv activities have iterated from the early work of Viola Spolin at Hull House (Spolin, 1963). Circumventing needs for memorization or prior experience, improv has shown to enhance focus, communication, acceptance, compassion, and well-being (Bermant, 2013). Improv increases personal awareness, interpersonal attentiveness, and trust among group members; such activities are unavoidably social wherein individual vulnerabilities contribute to collective strength (Bermant, 2013). As a health promotion practice, improv has demonstrated improvements in learning, social connectedness, self-confidence, and self-esteem in equity-seeking populations, including youth (Begun et al., 2022), women experiencing homelessness (Begun, 2022), and people with early-stage dementia (Stevens, 2012). Improv group participation is associated with increased positivity and self-awareness among older adults, outcomes attributed to enhanced problem solving and sustained social involvement (Morse et al., 2018). Improv is a mechanism to generate laughter, which reduces anxiety, stress, and loneliness, while improving energy level, feelings of empowerment, and restored hope (Berk, 2001). Improv has been linked to reduced mental health stigma, help-seeking behavior, and coping among incarcerated women (Wright et al., 2014).

Despite promising results observed in this burgeoning area of research, gaps exist regarding improv's potential to nurture positive outcomes among youth, in general, and more specifically, in the context of youth–adult partnerships. Considered a "best practice" in community-based youth programming, youth–adult partnerships are relationships that are intentionally formed between youth and adults, and which are rooted in shared decision making, youth agency, and collaboration to advance social justice and address community concerns (Zeldin et al., 2013). Dismantling adult-centric structures and sharing power amongst youth and adults involved in youth–adult partnerships necessitate conditions in which youth voice and positive relationships are authentically present (Zeldin et al., 2013). Youth–adult partnerships are different from the ways young people and adults typically interact; hierarchies based on myths equating age to wisdom are debunked as such inequities undermine youth from taking meaningful leadership roles (Ginwright & James, 2002).

Establishing trust and building meaningful relationships in youth–adult partnerships require genuine effort, time, and even vulnerability. Accordingly, engaging in group-based improv may

represent a novel way by which youth and adults can strengthen relationships, collaborate, and model power-sharing, particularly given improv's documented "immunity" to prior training, experience, or preparation (Bermant, 2013). The youth–adult partnership featured through this project is located in a university-based academic research lab that seeks to meaningfully engage youth voice in social justice research and community-change efforts. As part of the lab's commitment to ensuring that youth researchers are not tokenized and that their participation is authentic and not merely cosmetic, efforts at cultivating positive relationships rooted in trust, shared power, and decision making (Zeldin et al., 2014) are continually emphasized. In hierarchical structures such as academia, adult researchers are often viewed and referred to as leaders and experts; however, in the context of this youth–adult partnership, such norms are sought to be challenged. Theoretically rooted in tenets of social learning (Bandura, 1977), this highly exploratory pilot study aimed to qualitatively examine group-based improv participation experiences as a means of strengthening youth–adult partnerships.

Methods

Sample and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants affiliated with a university-based, youth-focused research lab, an entity that was established in winter 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic began to escalate in North American contexts. The intent of the lab is to create a space for academic researchers, community-based service providers, and most importantly, youth, to come together to explore research and social change issues of greatest importance to young people, by, with, and for youth. The lab is housed in a faculty of social work in a large North American city. Its efforts focus on issues impacting youth and young adult populations ages 16 to 29 across a range of equity-seeking domains, identities, and lived experiences. Within the lab, there are academic faculty researchers; university students at undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels who are employed as research assistants; and youth, ages 16–29, each of whom is also employed by the lab as a youth researcher.

As the lab was formed in a timeframe during which nearly all activities were required, by local public health guidance, to take place virtually over Zoom, the group became attentive to ways by which youth–adult partnerships might be developed and strengthened despite such restrictions. Such meaningful relationships and power sharing are difficult to achieve in usual circumstances but require even more thought and intentionality during a pandemic in which groups are unable to convene in person. An idea arose within the lab in response to other projects pertaining to improv that were underway, in which improv was being examined as a

potential way to facilitate positive communication and general well-being among several equity-seeking groups. Lab members began to wonder how engaging in improv may similarly benefit teams—especially those comprising youth–adult partnerships—housed in structures that are typically rigid hierarchies, such as academic institutions. This study thus emerged as an additional "arm" of a broader platform of research exploring how improv may be a useful tool for facilitating a range of positive outcomes.

Recruitment for the improv workshop consisted of providing a brief overview, during a team meeting, of the other improv studies that were in progress across the lab, noting that an idea came up within the team to explore the potential of such activities with regard to team building and youth–adult partnerships. A brief description of what the activities might look like within an improv workshop were provided, with the important caveat that the workshop was entirely optional and voluntary. As interest appeared to be enthusiastic for such an activity, efforts were sought to identify a workshop time that would align with the greatest number of possible participants, in the event they decided to drop in as voluntary attendees. Once a date and time were set and confirmed with the partnering organization's expert improv facilitator, a recap of the plans, the voluntary nature of the workshop, and Zoom information were sent to the entire lab team. Study procedures received full approval by the lab's university-based Research Ethics Board.

The project aimed to recruit approximately six to eight participants as the "ideal" group size for the workshop per the advice of the improv partner organization, based on its vast experience engaging groups in interactive improv games, skits, and scene-development training. Seven members of the lab attended the drop-in workshop, which was facilitated via Zoom. Participants consisted of five youth/student lab members and the two academic faculty members who co-founded the lab. Participants provided written informed consent regarding their participation in the workshop and follow-up research questionnaire, as all were aged 16 and over. Participants included five women and two men. Racially, the youth/student participants represented Black, Latina, and multi-racial identities and the two lab co-directors were White. All participants spoke English.

Procedures

The improv workshop met once via Zoom for 2 hours. The workshop was facilitated by an expert improv trainer and performer, who identified as a Black man, from the improv partner organization. At the beginning of the session, the principal investigator (PI) of the lab's various

improv projects introduced the facilitator, organized the consent and follow-up questionnaire process, and then also participated in all improv activities. The group engaged in community building, group norm setting, and improv skill development and refinement exercises, all of which were activities adapted from the improv partner organization's curriculum. The session concluded with a debriefing on how the improv activities and interactions were challenging, fun, perhaps relevant to daily life, and any other insights that arose for participants. These conversations were co-facilitated by the expert improv facilitator and PI.

Following the workshop, participants were invited to complete a qualitative questionnaire housed on Qualtrics, which asked questions about what participants liked, disliked, and insights pertaining to team building and strengthening youth–adult partnerships that may be facilitated or impeded through improv group participation. Responses were anonymous; the questionnaire contained clear language, just as was articulated in the consent process   and reiterated after the workshop, that participation in the workshop and questionnaire was purely optional and that responses would not, in any way, impact their role or status within the lab. No specific incentives were provided for this project, though youth/students were remunerated for their time per their usual hourly pay as stipulated in their employment contracts with the lab.

Analysis

Transcripts underwent qualitative template analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) by three coders. One coder was not present for the improv workshop, a decision that was made as an effort to further enhance rigor and reduce bias. The analytic process involved identifying codes and data segments that correspond to a priori areas of inquiry that referred directly to each question asked in the structured interview guide (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and then recognizing themes that emerged within such coding structures (Padgett, 2008). Themes that emerged within these a priori categories are reported, as follows, on Table 1.

Table 1. Qualitative Themes and Exemplar Quotes From Strengthening Youth-Adult Partnerships Through Improv

Question	Key theme	Exemplar quotes
What did you enjoy most about this workshop activity?	Dismantled power differentials: Everyone matters.	"I like how no one has an advantage or disproportionate power in improv. Everyone matters, no one is wrong or less than, and all ideas are needed for activities to work. The story formed would be altered completely if any one person weren't there, and that is such a powerful aspect."
	Challenging oneself is encouraged.	"I enjoyed watching everyone push themselves out of their comfort zone, myself included. And the activities themselves were fun, even when I was feeling self-conscious."
What was most challenging for you?	Fearing judgment	"Letting go of thoughts surrounding being judged or saying something wrong or inappropriate."
	Nervousness	"The most challenging part for me was getting over the initial nervousness."
What new or surprising things did you learn about yourself or your team?	Increased comfort in expressing oneself	"I learned something new about everyone's personality, which makes it easier to express myself and to be my truer self around them."
	Seeing new qualities in team-members	"I was pleasantly surprised at everyone's willingness to jump in and take risks. I got to know members of the team better. I saw sides of them that they're typically reluctant to reveal."
In what other ways did improv resonate with you, personally and interpersonally?	Application of improv to daily life: self-esteem and empathy	"There are sneaky epiphanies about daily life that can be drawn from improv. How we engage with these activities can say a lot about who we are - strengths we possess and ways that we hurt. I think it's so good for one's self-esteem to realize how creative they actually are. When no answers are "wrong", it shows how much our world would benefit from more empathy."
	Having no experts leads to feeling comfortable	"Because there was no script or manual to follow, we were all improvising, and it made the activities funny and unexpected. It helped me feel more comfortable with expressing my thoughts because there was no expert."
In what ways do you think improv may be a useful approach to strengthening youth-adult partnerships?	Relationship building, humanizing aspects	"I believe improv can be useful in strengthening youth-adult partnerships by fostering organic relationships through relational approaches. Young people often find value in the informal and "human" modes of connecting. I feel improv can be a great catalyst to support that, allowing both adults and young people to see one another outside of formalized roles or credentials."
	Trust building, bonding	"I believe camaraderie that can be built in youth-adult partnerships through improv would be extremely beneficial. Trust is necessary in these relationships and with activities like that, where everyone is open and having fun, it helps to form healthy bonds between youth and adults."

Results

Participants' questionnaire responses indicated overall positive experiences and support for the further examination and use of improv in strengthening youth–adult partnerships. Template analysis revealed two key themes pertaining to participants' positive insights on improv training: (a) Improv served to dismantle power differentials across youth and adults and conveyed that everyone's contributions mattered equally and (b) Improv encouraged challenging oneself, even if lacking improv experience or if feeling self-conscious about the activities. According to participants, the most challenging aspects were fearing judgment, worrying about "saying the wrong thing," and getting over their initial feelings of nervousness in trying this new and impromptu activity. However, participants learned about themselves and their team members in forms of feeling more comfortable expressing their true self with the group, with many noting they saw new sides to others' personalities and talents through the collective workshop experience. Participants resoundingly indicated that it would be useful to integrate improv exercises into activities carried out in youth–adult partnership settings, especially as the approach does not require or even value prior experience and facilitates building relationships in less formal, more "human" modes of connecting. In doing so, improv's ability to bring people together with empathy, positive risk taking, and levity were suggested as ways by which difficult conversations and trust building could be more effectively facilitated in team-building and power-sharing efforts. Table 1 displays a summary of emergent themes accompanied by exemplar quotes from participants.

Discussion

This study, which engaged members of a racially diverse youth–adult research collaborative in group-based improv activities, found promising support for improv as an approach to strengthening relationships and teams while dismantling power differentials in youth-adult partnership contexts. Reflecting other research findings that reported the potential of improv to increase social connectedness, self-esteem, and an array of health and wellness outcomes (Begun, 2022; Begun et al., 2022; Berk, 2001; Bermant, 2013; Morse et al., 2018; Stevens, 2012), participants enthusiastically reported that they grew more comfortable and open with their team members through such activities, and also saw new and more "human" sides to their team members.

As improv endorses a "no wrong answers" and "yes and" approach to scene building, participants must focus on being present, listening, and building with others in collaborative and non-judgmental ways. Because improv calls upon participants to test internal boundaries by

taking risks, along with its emphasis on showing external support for others' contributions, there may be utility in embedding improv activities into further dimensions of youth–adult partnerships. This may be especially true as such activities are impervious to notions of adults as "senior in knowledge," leaders, or experts. There is simply no amount of academic training, advanced degrees, or power held within structural hierarchies that will better prepare someone to participate in improv. Moreover, other dimensions of power, privilege, and oppression (e.g., race, gender, class, lived experience) are similarly challenged by improv's emphasis on equity and inclusion.

Though there were limitations (e.g., social desirability), the study was designed with voluntary participation, anonymous responses, and aimed to create comfortable, unique experiences for participants. Though the sample size was small and thus future studies may benefit from further and expanded inquiry, the group's size was deemed ideal for a highly interactive improv group workshop. In addition, the sample size is deemed appropriate for exploratory qualitative research (Padgett, 2008). Future research redesigns, however, could alternatively examine this area through quantitative or community-based participatory approaches.

Finally, while this study was conceptualized and carried out with a collective of youth and adults in an academic setting, it should be noted that the youth involved did not have affiliations with the university prior to becoming involved with the lab. Rather, youth opted to become active participants and leaders within the lab because of their lived experiences and identities and as an effort to amplify their voices through research in ways that are not tokenizing or superficial. Future research may thus also benefit from further exploring the inclusion of improv activities as ways of innovating and tailoring approaches to meaningfully engage youth in community-based programs and prevention services, and in the establishment of authentic youth-adult partnerships in additional settings.

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